

BELSHAZZAR'S LETTER¹

By KATHARINE FULLERTON GEROULD

(From *The Metropolitan*)

“BELSHAZZAR had a letter,
He never had but one,”

murmured Fenwick.

I should never have suspected Fenwick of having read, much less having memorized, the works of Emily Dickinson. Fenwick does not read—much; and how should he have got hold of Emily, anyhow? It appeared presently—for of course he was questioned—that he had picked up her poems in the home of a New England foreign missionary, where he had once perforce been marooned during a cholera epidemic. Fenwick himself is, I fancy, outside all creeds; but he can't help—given his life—running into missionaries, and he usually speaks well of them. He takes them, at all events, as all in the day's work, as he reports, from very strange places, to the “interests” that employ him. They have an eye out, those “interests,” for a good many different commodities, though I incline to believe that rubber is the chief. Adventure has never seemed to pry Fenwick loose from his very American moorings, though he told me on a certain occasion, with a dropped jaw (in a kind of wry whisper) that he had lost his religion once—just like that—in a typhoon.

I mention these facts concerning Fenwick for reasons that will appear later. He was leaving for San Francisco and the East the next week, by the way, and this was a scratch gathering of friends and acquaintances more or less to do Fenwick honor. Ben Allis and Mrs. Allis were giving the “party.” Nora Pate, Mrs. Allis's niece, was spending with them an enforced holiday from school. She was at the dinner-table on sufferance merely. It was Nora, with

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her giggling flapperish reference to a ouija-board occurrence at school that had elicited Fenwick's humorous quotation.

Now you must also know that we were a fairly intimate but more than fairly eclectic group at the Allis's table. Most of us were bred to one or another form of the Christian religion, went to church spasmodically (except Nora, who of course had to go every Sunday), and comfortably or uncomfortably, according to temperament, let the whole thing slide—took it for granted, or permitted it euthanasia, as it and our souls chose. But Mrs. Conway was a Catholic—"just the ordinary kind," as she had once said herself, with a sidelong glance at Mrs. Medford, who was waveringly "High"; Allis was a scientific skeptic, and Fenwick a reverent free-thinker. Or so I had gathered. The typhoon had made him a free-thinker, and his inheritance and temperament had apparently kept him reverent. My personal convictions do not matter, but when it comes to ouija-boards, I am all with Allis.

Young Nora had been rather stumped by Fenwick's quotation. She had probably heard of Belshazzar, but she had never heard of Emily, and she certainly did not see what it had to do with the ouija-board revelations at midnight in Betty Dane's room.

After we had found out just where Fenwick had read Emily Dickinson, the talk swung back to the occult. Mrs. Medford's pearl-powdered face and naturally red lips were eager. She even wanted the complete account of what had happened in Betty Dane's room. Nora needed no more encouragement than that.

"Why, Betty was desperate because she couldn't be at home when her cousin had his leave; and she asked ouija if there wasn't any chance of his leave being changed. And ouija said, 'Measles will make you free,' and of course we all laughed. Then we thought probably her cousin would have measles, so he couldn't come, and Betty would be free of disappointment. And the next week Pauline Case came down with them—and Betty *is* at home with her cousin, and she's going to bring back a book that tells all about everything depending on the way the breath circulates in your body."

The flushed Nora, at a glance from her aunt, sank out of sight below the conversational tide. But Mrs. Medford had smiled comfortingly at her.

"Prophesying is one thing they won't usually engage to do, you know," someone threw in. "I believe even Doyle and Lodge say that?"

"Naturally—since they have to get it out of your subconscious." This was Mrs. Conway.

Mrs. Medford turned upon her, a little acrid. You may have noticed that the two kinds of "Catholic" don't mix very well. "Has the Church decided that it's all your subconscious?"

Mrs. Conway's smile was all that she herself could have wished it to be. "Why, I believe so. Where else could they get it?"

"Whom do you mean by 'they'?" the other woman challenged.

"Why, the evil spirits." Mrs. Conway reached for a mint drop. "You see, the Church has had all this to settle so *many* centuries ago. It's hardly a new phenomenon."

If there was irony in Mrs. Conway's tone, it was not sharp enough to wound Fanny Medford. She looked rather pleadingly at the other woman's clever, gentle face. "Always evil spirits?" she murmured. "Never good ones?"

Mrs. Conway murmured back, and the two seemed for a moment to be isolated together. "Never good ones; and *never* the real dead. That is forbidden, you know."

I had hoped that our moving from the dining room would break the current, but I had reckoned without Fenwick. We had our coffee all together in Allis's big library—so much the nicest room in the house that I didn't much wonder at Maud Allis's refusing, except under great pressure, to drag the women away elsewhere. Nora Pate was sent upstairs to study, and we were freer. As soon as she had gone, Fenwick led us back to the subject. Mrs. Conway sat apart in the shadows, moving a fan slowly. Mrs. Medford fixed her eyes hungrily on Fenwick. The rest of us listened. After all, it was Fenwick's party.

"Of course you see all kinds of trances, and miracles, and levitation, and tricks, out in the East," he began. "I con-

fess I'm not much interested in what Hindus and such do. They're so different, anyhow. But it does interest me to come back to America for the first time since the war, and find everybody going it this way. The Americans and English out there do it, too. But there's an epidemic here, as far as I can make out. Look at your niece and her ouija-board. And all of us ready to argue about it. Honestly, I'm interested. I'm perfectly open-minded about it, myself. I'm not psychic, or whatever you call it."

"You don't have to be 'psychic.' There's no such thing." This came out of the shadows where Mrs. Conway's fan waved.

Mrs. Medford turned and gazed at her, as if trying to penetrate even deeper shadows that lay between them.

"Oh, well, I mean—I've sat in on table-tipping once or twice, but I don't think I added much. I never saw any ghosts, or had anything queer happen to me. I know a man out in Singapore who does automatic writing, though —gets stuff through from his mother. At least, he says he doesn't believe it's his mother, but he keeps right on, all the same. He says she has told him things that no one else could have known about."

"*He* knew about them, didn't he?" asked Allis, with heavy matter-of-factness.

"Why, yes—he and she."

"Well, it all came out of his subconscious."

"I daresay." Fenwick set down his coffee-cup and took a cigarette proffered him by Mrs. Allis. "Only I'm sick of you people all wagging your heads and saying, 'the subconscious' every time you're up against it. Why don't you get busy and explain how the thing works?"

"Ah, yes, why don't you?" Mrs. Medford seized on Fenwick's challenge as if it were her own.

Allis pulled his moustache and spoke judicially. "I'm not a psychologist myself, as you very well know—not even a biologist. I don't know that science has explained the technique of it yet, though they are working on this sort of thing all the time. Hysteria, secondary personality, dreams—all these things are being put under the microscope, and they're finding out."

"I'd rather believe in spooks than in Freud, any day." This was Carter, a gay soul.

Allis ignored him. "I daresay you do know, though, that alienists are using automatic writing in their treatment of patients now. They find that some traumas, too deep-laid for hypnotism to probe to, can be brought to the surface by getting the patient to write automatically. That is one for the subconscious, anyhow."

"But—" this was Fanny Medford, brave on her own account—"what about the things that never were in your subconscious; couldn't have been there? They get those too—indeed they do."

"I agree with Fanny and Mr. Fenwick," said Maud Allis. "I don't believe it's the spirits of the dead; but neither do I believe that the psychologists have explained it yet. I'm open-minded."

"I'm open-minded, too," laughed young Carter. "Ready to try anything. Except Nora's ouija-board. That's too darned easy."

A slim form in white came out of the shadows—Mrs. Conway, gray-eyed, ivory-cheeked, like a warm ghost. "Can't you see," she said, "that an open mind is the most dangerous thing there is? Because if your mind is really open, any evil thing can get in."

She put her arm round Fanny Medford's waist, with a soft, sidelong gesture, though she faced our host, directly questioning him. Mrs. Medford stirred a little against the light encircling arm—barely noticing it, it seemed. Her face was flushed beneath her pearl powder. She addressed Allis and Carter, now standing abreast before the fireplace.

"Have you ever tried automatic writing?"

"No."

"Nor I," cut in Mrs. Allis, "but I'm going to try sometime. Has anyone here tried it?" Maud Allis went on, looking round at her group.

I shook my head, Fenwick and Carter theirs. Mrs. Conway merely said, "You forget I'm a Catholic."

"How about Mrs. Medford herself?" Young Carter marked us off on his fingers.

"Oh, I—I've tried it, yes. But I can't do it!" She bit

her lip and turned away, and before we quite realized that she was crying she had made a soft plunge through the wide doorway into the next room. Maud Allis followed her, but returned in a few moments.

"She'll be all right presently. She'll come back. It's just that she is so interested. Ever since her brother, Jack Hilles, was killed, she's been trying to 'get through' to him; and she can't do it herself. She began going to a medium, and the woman had no sooner established communication for her than she died. Now, Fanny's rather up against it. She's not the kind that likes to go to mediums, you know. I'm awfully sorry you started the subject."

"Why didn't you stop us, if you knew all that?" Ben queried.

"I didn't. She just told me about the medium now. Oh, she'll pull herself together all right. It may do her good to have it out with a sensible crowd like this. We didn't put it into her head. It's there all the time—has been, ever since Jack Hilles was killed in the Argonne."

"Well, we'll drop it right here," Allis replied.

But Mrs. Medford was back among us and heard him.

"You won't drop anything on my account, I hope. Maud may have told you it's the one thing I'm interested in. It's just awfully hard luck that I can't do anything by myself. If you people really feel like trying anything, don't let me stop you. I daresay the rest of you are as bad as I am, anyway. Not 'psychic'—though Mrs. Conway says there's nothing in that."

"There isn't," Mrs. Conway averred again.

"Let's try it, anyhow," cried young Carter. "Not table-tipping. Let's sit about and turn the lights out and each take a pencil, and see if we can do automatic writing."

Fanny Medford clapped her hands. "Oh, do! Only, of course, I can't. But perhaps"—she looked us over hungrily—"some of you can, and I might get a tip as to the right way to manage. And, anyway, it's so interesting." Certainly she had recovered.

"I'm not going to sit with the lights out all the evening," grumbled Allis. "This was supposed to be, in its humble way, a dinner-party."

"Well, of course, not all the evening," Maud conceded. "Quarter of an hour. And then we'll stop and play bridge."

"It would be rather fun." This was Genevieve Ford. I have not mentioned Miss Ford before, simply because she had taken no part in the conversation that I have detailed. She happened to you, once in so often, in somebody's house, and you didn't much care, one way or the other. She was just a nice girl, a little more restful than some, perhaps. I think the Allises hoped against hope that some day she and Carter . . . I don't know why."

Somehow, Miss Ford's quiet speech clinched it. Perhaps because she had been an outsider through the talk.

"Good for you. Let's!" Carter dashed to Ben's table and swept some pencils off it. "Paper, Allis? And more pencils. We'll scatter about through the rooms so that everyone can have a table-edge or a chair-arm."

Allis found us pads of paper and pencils—all except Mrs. Conway, who refused to join us and went off to fetch her knitting. We all looked at each other rather helplessly.

"How do you begin?" I asked.

"I suppose you douse the glim." Carter snapped off the light nearest to him.

"That's perfectly unnecessary," Fenwick commented. "The man I know in Singapore does it any time—in broad daylight, between courses at tiffin, if he feels like it. All you do is to let your hand go slack, and think about something quite different."

Mrs. Conway, who had returned with her knitting, intervened. "I wouldn't think too hard about something quite different, if I were you. That is, not if you want results."

"But we want to play fair," Maud Allis protested. "There's no sense in trying this kind of thing unless you do your best."

"I only meant," Mrs. Conway explained, "that if you really want to let them in, you must make your mind as blank as possible. Don't make an effort to think of anything. Just open the door and wait. You make me feel like an accessory before the fact"—she smiled a little—

"except that I really don't believe anything will happen."

She withdrew to a sofa and began to knit.

"You just have to be quiet." Fenwick gave his last explanations. "And let your right arm be comfortably slack, and don't look at the paper if you do begin to write. And if nothing happens in twenty minutes"—he looked interrogatively at Maud Allis—"then we play bridge, do we?"

Mrs. Allis nodded. "And I'm going to put out some of the lights, whether it's necessary or not. We'd be rather ridiculous in a glare, and we'd probably all be looking at each other to see if anyone's else arm was moving." So she reduced the room to a demi-obscurity, very soothing and non-committal.

Fenwick sat at the other end of Mrs. Conway's sofa, resting his pad on his knee. "Won't your knitting spoil it?" he murmured.

"Dear no," she whispered back. "I'll stop, if you like. But knitting-needles won't keep them away."

"No fooling, Ben." Mrs. Allis's admonishing words were the last spoken. After that, silence.

I did my best to play the game, but my hand did not move. I became, somehow, perfectly sure that it never would move, and that conviction edged my voluntary slackness of spirit. The corners of the room were too dark for me to see how each fellow guest was faring; but I noted idly the little stir of Mrs. Conway's needles, the faint fire-glow on Mrs. Medford's bent blonde head, Ben Allis's comfortably hunched position, Miss Ford's graceful, pensive attitude. After fifteen minutes, I constituted myself time-keeper, moving my left hand so that the radium dial of my wrist-watch showed. I stared at it until I began to feel prickly all over. If my arm didn't move then, I thought, I was surely no good at the business; for I was half hypnotized by my concentrated stare at the dial, and my left hand certainly had no physical knowledge of what my right hand, off in space, was doing.

When twenty minutes were up, no one stirred. I decided to give them a little more time, for good measure. The minute-hand crawled as it does when you are taking a

pulse or a temperature. Before the half hour was quite reached, Ben Allis leaped to his feet.

"I'm tired of this. There's nothing in it. Switch on the lights, you people."

But the others were stretching cramped limbs, rising slowly from their fixed positions, tottering in the half-gloom. I had not risen, myself, and I watched them. They looked drugged, unsure, wan and ungraceful in the dim light—purgatorial poor souls. Only for a second; but just for a second the only normal thing in the scene was the implacable motion of Mrs. Conway's fingers. Then Carter turned on the light at my elbow, and I saw my own pad of paper. The page, ten inches by eight, was covered with the huge scrawl of two words: "Ask Fenwick." And I had not known, staring at the dial of my watch, that my arm had moved.

The other lights went on, then. People held their sheets of paper up before them like shields, and moved to the nearest lamp. All except Fenwick, who still held to his corner of the sofa.

"Nothing—of course." Mrs. Medford spoke first, then flung her pad down on the table.

"Nothing here." Ben Allis grinned over his.

"Mine says something!" Maud Allis cried, as she bent over it under a lamp. "But I can hardly read it, it's so queer."

Miss Ford and Carter pressed towards her.

"Oh, I see now," she said. "It's 'Ask Fenwick.' "

I bit my lip and delayed my contribution to knowledge. But while Carter and Genevieve Ford were examining the unsoiled whiteness of their sheets of paper, I looked at Fenwick. He sat in his corner, open-eyed now but tired, surrounded by white things. Mrs. Conway had stopped knitting and was looking at him with concentrated interest. Her hand fluttered over the sheets of paper that lay between them on the sofa, but never once quite touched them.

The group at the table turned to me. "Did you get anything?" they chorused. Their backs were all more or less turned to Fenwick and Mrs. Conway, you understand.

I came forward. "Just like Maud's. 'Ask Fenwick.' Pick up your manuscript, Fenwick," I called, "and let us see it."

They all turned, then.

"Why, he's written *heaps!*" Mrs. Medford rushed to the sofa, but Mrs. Conway's lifted hand fended her off from the papers. "Give him time," she murmured; "he doesn't realize yet what he's done."

Mrs. Medford stopped, but Carter was not so easily dealt with. He strode over and began picking up the sheets of paper.

Fenwick yawned. "Can I have a cigarette? By gum! I think I must have pulled something off, my arm is so tired." He flexed it as he rose.

"You did, my boy, you did! Well, who says we aren't psychic?" This was Carter, arranging the sheets in the order in which presumably they had fallen from Fenwick's busy hand.

An odd look passed between Mrs. Conway and her host. Both started to speak together. Then she yielded to him, nodding acquiescence as Ben said: "They are Fenwick's property. It's up to him whether or not he gratifies our curiosity."

But, Fenwick, jaunty now, uncramped, waved his cigarette. "It belongs to the company. I'm delighted to have been successful. But isn't it extraordinary that I shouldn't once have realized that I was writing or that I was tearing those sheets off?"

"You did it very quietly. There was no noise," Mrs. Conway volunteered.

"Can't we read the stuff, right off?" Carter inquired anxiously.

Allis leaned over and took the papers from him. There must have been four or five sheets. Neither he nor Carter had examined them.

"Fenwick's property. It's up to Fenwick."

"I don't want the stuff. Let's read it aloud if it makes any sense."

Mrs. Conway rose with determination. "Why not hand it over to me? I won't read it."

But Mrs. Medford cried out. "Mr. Gregory wrote, 'Ask Fenwick.' So did Maud Allis. We *must* ask Fenwick."

"Yes. What's the use of spending all this time in an experiment if we can't see what we've accomplished?" Miss Ford voiced her own and Carter's grievance.

"Well, Fenwick"—Allis's bantering voice threw in—"if you are ready to vouch for the absolute purity of your subconscious, shall we oblige the ladies?"

Fenwick looked sheepish. "Oh, I say! You don't mean to load that stuff, whatever it is, off on me. Why, it may be a résumé of the last French novel I read—or anything."

Mrs. Conway spoke, for the first time, with some sharpness. "You don't, any of you, know what may be there. It may be utter nonsense, or it may be a sermon. But whatever is there comes from no good place."

Some of us laughed. "You're very hard on Fenwick's subconscious," Allis said.

"It's the first time you've ever done it?" Mrs. Conway asked.

"Absolutely the first." Fenwick nodded.

"Well, then"—she sighed—"it's probably all right. They're usually careful how they begin." She shrugged her shoulders.

We moved in a body to the big lamp on Allis's writing-table. "Thank goodness, Nora's upstairs," Maud Allis giggled in my ear.

Fenwick now had let himself go in the spirit of Carter and Genevieve Ford, as they chaffed him. "All right," he said; "I may be done for, but who wrote 'Ask Fenwick'? Seems to me we're all tarred with the same brush anyhow."

He held up the first page, getting the light over his shoulder, and began to read:

"'Jack Hilles speaking.'" The manuscript opened like a telephone call.

Fenwick broke off. "Oh, I say, you don't want me to read this. There can't be anything in it, and we'd all be sorry to go any further—"

But Mrs. Medford came close to him, her eyes almost glaring with the intensity of her feeling—a queer, soft,

mad glare. I saw, like a shot, that she wasn't going to be easy to manage.

"Mr. Fenwick, you've no right to stop," she panted.

Ben Allis had gone completely white under his pink-and-tan. Later, I knew why, but then I was merely surprised. Ben was not the man to be upset by preposterous hints of the supernatural.

Fenwick tried to temporize. "But, Mrs. Medford, we can't play with serious matters. We must respect the dead." Fenwick had not looked ahead; it was obvious that he simply did not wish to be responsible for anything that purported to be a message.

"He's my brother! And if he gets through to you while I'm here, it's for me. That is my property."

Allis came up and looked shamelessly over Fenwick's shoulder at the writing. "No, it isn't, Fanny. It's Fenwick's. He shall do absolutely what he pleases with it in my house. I'm responsible."

There was a curious morbid note of confession in his voice. But no one paid any attention to tones of voice, because a very undignified scene followed immediately on his words.

Mrs. Medford clutched the papers that Fenwick held. She got away with the first page, too, and turned her back on us—heading for the drawing room beyond. "Don't you dare, as you believe in a God, to destroy any of it," she threw back over her shoulder.

She had to fight for even her one page—not very hard, for of course Fenwick couldn't struggle with her physically. The two men, Allis and Fenwick, looked ridiculous as they faced each other in the tacit admission that they couldn't help themselves. Ben pulled himself together quickly. "Get that away from her, Maud—by force, if necessary."

"But, Ben——"

"I said, 'by force, if necessary,' Maud," he repeated sternly.

She flew ahead after Mrs. Medford, obedient, but sowing her path with protesting murmurs.

Genevieve Ford giggled nervously. Carter raised his eyebrows to the ceiling. "What *is* up, you fellows?" he asked weakly.

I heard Allis whisper to Fenwick: "Did you ever know him—Hilles?"

"No. Never heard his name till tonight?"

"Then what the devil——"

"I thought you'd come to the devil in time." This was Mrs. Conway on the outskirts.

An indignant cry came back from Maud Allis. "Really, Ben, I can't. You'd better come yourself. She won't give it to me. Fanny, be sensible!" Then the sound trailed off further.

We followed—Allis, Fenwick, Miss Ford, and I. We passed through the drawing-room where they had been a few seconds before, and out into the hall. Maud Allis stood there furious, a little dishevelled, sucking a hurt finger. "She's locked herself into the telephone closet. I don't know what you expect me to do."

"Not anything more. We can't help it now. We'll go away and leave her. She'll come out."

But Maud was shaking with anger and nervousness. "How do you know she will? If it's anything so bad that she oughtn't to see it, she may never come out. She may just die there."

Allis smiled in spite of himself. "People don't just die in telephone closets. And she'll come out, if for nothing else, because she wants to see the rest of it."

"But if it should be so dreadful——"

"It doesn't make any difference how dreadful it may be. She'll feel she's got to see it. Oh, damn!"

Then he moved over to the door of the closet. "Fanny," he shouted, "we're going back to the library. If you don't come out inside of five minutes, we'll break down the door. Now what a fool thing that was to say," he murmured, precisely as if we were to blame for his words.

A slender figure in white Spanish lace became suddenly manifest among us. "Mrs. Allis, can I telephone?" Mrs. Conway asked softly.

"No, I'm afraid you can't." Maud's answer was grim. "Fanny Medford has locked herself into the telephone closet with the first sheet of that wretched stuff."

"Then will someone go out and telephone for me"—she

gave the number—"and ask them to send my car at once?"

"Ben can telephone from the extension upstairs," Maud suggested sullenly.

"Oh, thank you. I wish he would."

Allis turned suddenly upon Mrs. Conway. "I can't pretend that, as a host, I'm proud of my hospitality. But don't you think it would be kinder all round if we didn't break up? We might be able to get that poor thing out of her hysteria if we all stuck about and did our best?"

"I have no intention of going before Mrs. Medford does, Mr. Allis," was the very quiet reply. "I thought it might be a good thing to have the car waiting. Mayn't I go up and telephone, myself? I think Mr. Allis ought to stay here."

Maud nodded. "It's in my room." And Mrs. Conway moved upstairs. She leaned over the stair-rail on the first landing and spoke to Fenwick. "Don't destroy those other pages. If she still wants to see them, she'd better—much better."

"You don't know what's in them," Fenwick answered. Nor did he, but he evidently considered they were not to be lightly treated.

"It doesn't make any difference what's in them. Not even if it were the Black Mass." She went on, up.

We went back into the library then, and Allis stood, watch in hand, waiting. He was beginning to mean it, about breaking down the door, I could see. Allis had had a good glimpse of the first page. Fenwick had seen a little. None of the rest of us knew anything but those three first words like a telephone call: "Jack Hilles speaking."

Before Allis moved, Mrs. Medford came slowly through the drawing room, holding the sheet of paper very carefully in her hand. A little behind, Mrs. Conway's white form gently stalked her.

Fanny Medford's poor little head was held very high. "I suppose you people have read the rest—and doubtless Mr. Fenwick has told you what is in this." She tapped the paper.

"Not one of us knows anything or has read a word," Maud Allis declared.

Allis frowned. "That's not quite true, Maud. I saw a little—a few sentences—of what Mrs. Medford took with her. I daresay Fenwick saw as much. But no one has seen all of it except Mrs. Melford, and no one has seen any of the other sheets. That is the exact state of the case."

"You will kindly give me the rest of the writing," Mrs. Medford went on, to Fenwick.

But Mrs. Conway stepped forward and slipped the sheets from Fenwick's grasp. He let her take them, though he looked at Allis anxiously. The situation was becoming Mrs. Conway's.

"I have them, you see," She turned to Mrs. Medford. "And if you insist, *you* shall have them. Of course I wish you would let me destroy them all, here and now. It isn't true, you know, that the dead communicate. They don't."

Mrs. Medford was shaking, but her voice was still her own. "They do. I know they do. Jack talked to me through Mrs. Weale, who's dead now. But not this kind of thing. It's wicked, it's beastly, what you've done!" she cried to Fenwick.

"But, Mrs. Medford, I don't even know what's there—except the first sentences. I never knew your brother. I don't believe this stuff, of course."

"Nobody believes anything, Fanny." Allis corroborated him. "This sort of thing has been shown up, time and again, for the most arrant trash. It's just our bad luck that something got written that was upsetting for you."

"You believe it—you know you do." Her voice was half a choke in her throat.

To my consternation, Allis did not deny it, at once and with passion. "Fanny, don't be absurd. You know perfectly well what my attitude to these matters is—purely scientific skepticism."

"I say that you believe those things of Jack. As for Mr. Fenwick"—she disposed of him then and there with a look of loathing—"I leave him to the rest of you."

Maud Allis followed her out of the room.

Allis took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead. "Any one of you men feel like seeing her home?" he asked. "Fenwick and I would seem to be out of the running."

Mrs. Conway put out her hand. "Good-night, Mr. Allis. Of course I'm going to take her home. What did you suppose I ordered my car for?" She did not bid the rest of us good-night, but she seemed to address us all in parting. "Naturally, I don't know what's in these papers. But I take it, it is something pretty bad—about her brother. Mrs. Medford may have to see them, since I promised her; but I guarantee you they shall be destroyed without my, or anyone's else, reading them. It's all nonsense, of course, but you see she half believes. Truly, I'm the best person to see her through, because I can explain it."

"It's just some foolish trick of muscles—and re-arranging all the words in the dictionary," burst in Fenwick, hotly.

"Yes." She smiled. "But *what* foolish trick? That's what you can't explain to her. And I can. You may not think my explanation is correct, but at least it begins at the beginning and sees you through to the end. That is why I shall try to convince her. You open-minded people can't."

"Even so," Allis said, "I don't see how you're going to manage it."

She had turned to go, but she stopped and answered him. "I've this advantage, you see. You can't tell her *why* it happened. I can. Malice accounts for everything."

"There's not an ounce of malice in this crowd," Carter remarked.

"No, not among us. But the things you let in to your foolish minds are all malice. Believe me, they've had a ripping time to-night. They have to take what they can find—yes. It's the way they use it that counts."

"But suppose whatever it is were true," Miss Ford murmured. "Suppose it was her brother, after all, getting through."

"I've told you the dead can't get through—not the real dead. It's only spirits pretending."

"You'll never get her to believe that," Allis said ruefully. "None of us could believe that."

"Pardon me, I could," Mrs. Conway threw back. "And if I can make Mrs. Medford believe it, too, it will be the best way out of the mess you've made."

"Good luck go with you," he called after her. But he seemed dazed.

When Maud Allis came back, Miss Ford made her adieux, and Carter left with her. They had been, from first to last, outsiders, and perhaps it was the most tactful thing they could have done. I prepared to follow them, and Maud Allis, saying good-night to them, bade me good-night, too.

"I've got to see Nora," she said. "I promised her I would before she went to bed. I meant to cut out from bridge. Probably I shall see you again, Mr. Fenwick. Sorry you have to go, Mr. Gregory." There was certainly no urge to stay, in her voice. She was more done up than she owned. Yet she had not seen those sheets that Fenwick had written—any more than I had, or Mrs. Conway, or Genevieve Ford, or Carter.

I let Carter and Miss Ford get away a little in front of me, thinking that they were best by themselves, in the fellowship of their detachment from it all. Whatever had happened to the rest of us had left them unscathed. They had not been touched, apparently, by the episode, except to see that Mrs. Medford's exit was a cue for them to break up the party. I lighted a cigarette in the vestibule, and craned my neck to see them turn the corner. It was jerked back by a clutch on my collar, and I dropped the cigarette.

"Come back in here, you idiot!" said Allis in my ear. "Did you really think you were going?"

Yes, I really had thought so; but I went in again.

I found, when I reached the library (Allis locked the door behind us) that he had furnished Fenwick with a precious drink. He offered me none, and was taking nothing himself. Whiskey is medicine, in these days.

"Fenwick and I need some one else to sit in with us," Allis declared. "I may have to tell Maud later. That's neither here nor there. I'm glad those two young people had the sense to go. If they hadn't, I'd have kicked them out."

"Well, of course, I'm eaten alive with curiosity," I admitted. "Only it all sounded like the sort of thing that wouldn't be mentioned again unless necessary. I never saw a word of the stuff, remember."

"I saw precious little of it, and Fenwick here saw no more than I did." Allis began to walk about with his hands in his pockets. "You can see the effect it has had on Fenwick."

Fenwick's head was buried in his hands. "I wrote the damned stuff. That's what gets me." I saw why Allis had fetched whiskey for him.

"We aren't going to quote it for your benefit—even if we could," went on Allis. "But you can take it from us that it was unmitigated filth. We judge by sample."

"Then why did you give the rest of it to those women?" I shouted. "Why didn't you burn up what you had your hands on, at least?"

"Easy, now, easy." But Allis was troubled. He made an eloquent gesture over Fenwick's bowed head. "We practically had to do what Mrs. Conway said. I believe she *is* the person to deal with Fanny Medford. Evil spirits are the best way out—if she can take it. And Mrs. Conway is a clever woman. But we three have got to sift the matter. It seemed to be autobiographical, by the way—statement of things done in the past. Buck up, Fenwick. It's more my fault than yours."

"Your fault? You didn't even write 'Ask Fenwick,'" our friend retorted. The whiskey was strengthening him a little.

Allis paid no attention. "I take it for granted that none of us now present subscribes to Mrs. Conway's theory. Very well. That's that. Fenwick wrote automatically a lot of stuff of which he and I have seen a little. It all purported to be Jack Hilles speaking, and on that basis it was Jack Hilles very much giving himself away. Of course, it wasn't Jack Hilles any more than it was the Secretary of State. Mrs. Conway is right, at least, when she says the dead don't communicate."

"Then this kind of thing just flowers naturally out of the rich soil of my mind, I suppose?" Fenwick asked sarcastically.

Allis smiled faintly. "I wouldn't say that. But you've knocked about the world more than most of us, and you've seen more than your share of exotic rottenness. Gregory

and I would have had to go out and hunt for it. You've had it thrust upon your notice. If your subconscious stores it up, it isn't your fault."

"But what on earth should make me drag out horrors and attribute them to a man I never laid eyes on, who died fighting for his country in the Argonne?"

"That," said Allis deliberately, "is where I come in."

"You?" We both exclaimed.

Allis leaned against the chimney-piece, his hands still in his pockets. "Well, yes. Of course Jack Hilles' name was bound to appear if any name appeared — after the way Fanny had gone on. But if that sort of thing was dragged out of you, about Hilles, instead of nice, sweet, comforting things, it was probably because my mind was stronger than Fanny Medford's."

"Do you mean that you were thinking that kind of thing about Hilles all the time?" Fenwick queried.

"No, I wasn't *thinking* those things about him," Allis answered slowly. "I merely *knew* those things about him. That is—I never knew he did anything so bad as what was written there, but I knew he was a bad lot."

"Then why didn't you write the stuff?"

"Like Mrs. Conway, I'm not open-minded. I disbelieve it too utterly. I'm prejudiced. But I don't doubt my knowledge acted telepathically on your more sensitive — what shall I say? — mental mechanism. It's all suggestion. Mrs. Medford involuntarily suggests Jack Hilles to you, and I involuntarily suggest the kind of person I knew him to be."

We were silent for a moment.

"It's hideous, all the same," I said finally. "He's dead, after all—in the Argonne."

"But not fighting for his country," Allis remarked quietly. "He was shot—for other reasons. I've no particular business to know that for a fact, but I do. Fanny Medford never knew the worst of Jack Hilles, but she had no illusions about him until he went into the war. Then he became a hero. When he was 'killed in the Argonne' — which is all *she* knows about it—he was *a fortiori* a hero; a super-hero, if you like. You may have noticed that Fanny isn't exactly impersonal in her attitude to life."

He went on, after a pause. "I hope no one saw anything in my expression. . . . I was rather shaken by the glimpse I got. I never thought even Jack Hilles went so far as that. I wonder if Fanny saw. She accused me of believing it all. She must have meant she thought I believed it on the score of Fenwick's automatic writing. I believed it on the score of knowing that Hilles was capable of anything. And that, I perhaps didn't conceal sufficiently—and all of it—I'm banking heavily on Mrs. Conway to explain."

"I still don't see why I had to write the miserable stuff," argued Fenwick—though he seemed a little more at ease than he had been.

"Well, I can't tell you that," Allis replied. "I'm inclined to believe that Mrs. Conway is wrong about people's not being, more or less, 'psychic.' Certainly, even she would have to admit that some are more sensitive, readier vehicles than others. It looks to me as though you were a corker, Fenwick!"

Fenwick brooded for a time in silence, while Allis and I smoked. At last he spoke. "No, it's too queer. Evil spirits would explain everything, but I haven't gone back to the Middle Ages yet. You try to explain it, Allis, by arranging an intricate system of mental telephone wires—installed in an instant, ready for the emergency. That may be accurate, but it's extremely complicated. Too complicated, I'd say. I'm not contradicting you, you understand. But for myself, I usually take the line of least resistance." He rose and faced us. His fingers twitched a little as he, in turn, lighted a cigarette.

"Meaning—?" Allis queried.

"Meaning that if Jack Hilles was the kind of person you say he was, the easiest place for that sort of screed to have come from is—Jack Hilles."

Allis's lips folded themselves firmly. "If you choose to admit the supernatural hypothesis, I suppose it *is* easy. I was ruling out impossibilities."

"The fact that you haven't proved a thing possible doesn't mean that you've proved it impossible, does it? How about you, Gregory?" Fenwick turned to me.

I threw up my hands. "Oh, I'm with Allis. It sounds queer and far-fetched and all, but anything is more reasonable than believing the dead communicate in that way. Even Mrs. Conway is more reasonable."

"Well, I wish to God they had rigged up their wireless on Allis's roof instead of mine!" Fenwick exploded. He turned his back on us and walked over to a dark window.

I tried to be judicial. "If Allis was thinking about the sort of creature Jack Hilles really was, that in itself accounts for the telepathy business."

Allis glared at me. "I wasn't thinking of Jack Hilles. I knew he was a very bad lot, but I wasn't thinking about it—not at all. I was wondering if Carter and Genevieve Ford would pull it off. And, anyhow, I couldn't have thought that kind of thing about Hilles. It just wouldn't naturally have occurred to me. Whereas, it might have, to Fenwick, with his background."

Ben Allis stopped, suddenly, and I felt the blood in my body, for an instant, back up in its channels. For just as Allis finished speaking, Fenwick drew back from his window and crumpled up against the sofa. No, he did not faint. He was, rather, at bay there, against the world; against Allis and me, who rushed to him at once. I did not try to read that face, though it shouted at me silently. I turned my head away. "Damn you all, damn you all!" Fenwick's white lips were saying. "And I thought I'd got rid of it forever. Oh, damn you both!" Yet he did not seem to be standing outside his own curse.

Fenwick roused himself at the sound of a knock on the library door, and we faced about. The knock saved us three from something pretty awful.

It was Maud Allis, and in her hand she carried a ouija-board. "I found Nora playing with this thing," she said; "and after to-night it was more than I could bear. Will you please burn it up now—so I can see it burn?"

"You bet I will!" Allis broke it over his knee, and went to the fire which had almost died out.

With one eye on Fenwick, slowly, very slowly, composing himself to a normal posture and a normal expression,

with a sense that I must keep Maud off him, I drew her away in the direction of the door. "I hope"—and I laid my hand on her wrist—"the thing hasn't been worrying Nora. She didn't get any echoes, did she?"

"Oh dear, no. It had just been writing foolishness—probably the kind of foolishness you would expect to come out of Nora's subconscious."

"Nothing about Jack Hilles?" I tried to laugh.

"I should hope not! Betty Dane's cousin, they're all in love with; and their matinée heroes; and their school commencement. But I've put her to bed and taken it away. I will not have my niece ouija-ing."

Ouija was now burning brightly above the Cape Cod lighter. Ben Allis called to his wife. "Maud, do get a taxi round at once for Fenwick. He's tired and doesn't want to walk."

"Certainly, I will. Did you people come to any conclusion?"

"Ben has the right of it, I'm sure. Telepathy." I spoke quite loud. "He'll tell you all about it. We're going."

Maud went off to the telephone.

Fenwick's voice cut in. "Thanks for thinking of the taxi, Allis. I believe I do want one. Good-night."

"Shall I come along with you?" I asked, thinking of Mrs. Conway's brave support of Fanny Medford.

Allis frowned, and Fenwick, though he had got himself in hand, seemed to cringe a little before the frown. "No, thanks. I'm going straight to bed. It's needless to say, I suppose, that this thing shall go no further, as far as I am concerned. I can't say it has been a pleasant evening, but it has been interesting. It's funny, isn't it"—he spoke rapidly, but carefully—"that a party of friends can react so differently? Mrs. Conway thinks it's evil spirits; I think Hilles did get through; and you and Allis think it was all communicated from Allis's subconscious to mine. But we all hope that Mrs. Conway will convince Mrs. Medford."

No; he could evidently take care of himself now. And he obviously wanted to be alone. Mrs. Allis, returning, rallied him as she said good-night.

"Your taxi is there already, I think, Mr. Fenwick. What do you think of Belshazzar's letter *now*? I'm sorry you had to get the letter."

It was all right for Maud to carry things off lightly—probably she felt it was her duty—but it didn't help Allis and me so much as she doubtless hoped.

"I think I can promise never to meddle with this sort of thing again," he said gravely. "I'm convinced it was the real thing. Your husband thinks he was responsible. He'll explain to you."

Allis answered the plea that sounded faintly in Fenwick's voice. "Yes, Maud shall have my telepathy theory. I think she'll agree. Maud, do go to the door with Fenwick. There's no fender here, and I don't like to leave ouija."

Maud Allis, as you may have made out, was a good wife who never argued an absurdity if her husband perpetrated it. She preceded Fenwick to the hall.

Allis gripped my hand. "I shall tell Maud exactly what I said. You'll tell nobody anything."

"Of course not. For Mrs. Medford's sake, if nothing else."

Allis relaxed his grip. "Yes—and Fenwick's, too. I've been fond of him for a long time. Perhaps he'll never give himself away again."

"Perhaps not," I agreed. "Asia is a large continent. He may come to believe it was Hilles communicating, you know."

"Well, I rather hope he does. Fenwick's got to live. But you and I don't believe it."

"No, we don't."

"It's queer," Allis mused; "you and I are the only ones of the crowd who know what happened; and the one thing we are most anxious for is that everyone concerned—even Fenwick himself—should be convinced of some explanation we know is wrong. We want Mrs. Medford to believe Mrs. Conway; I want Maud to believe what I said here a while ago; and I even want Fenwick to believe that the dead communicate. We're a scientific lot, aren't we?"

"I'm not sure I wouldn't rather believe any of those things than believe what I do," I said grimly. I remembered Fenwick's face.

"Exactly. Poor science!"

Mrs. Allis returned, and I bade my host and hostess good night. This time I did not go back again.